To He Or Not To He

That is the Question?

BY VICKI RICHMAN

On opposite pages of a recent issue of *The Village Voice*, Candy Darling was referred to as she and Jackie Curtis as he. The question is beginning to puzzle many liberated people: What's the difference, or is there a difference? How do you figure out the right thing to do by pronouns?

First of all, do you want to do the right thing? Unfortunately, there is a prevalent philosophy—most commonly found among parents and puritans—that if the kid wants it enough, you've got a duty to say no. So, the more convincingly a person tries to change sexual identities, the more righteously some people will insist on the less recent gender. After Christine Jorgenson's operation, Earl Wilson outdid himself in cleverly structuring his sentences to include the pronoun "he" as often as possible.

The same attitude was evident when newspaper writers insisted on using Muhammad Ali's former name. Actors have been changing their names forever with the blessings of the press, but when the boxer did it for reasons of personal philosophy instead of economic necessity, the columnists became indignant. He seemed to be digging it too much. Was honesty or prudery making their choice?

In the *Voice*, the reference to Jackie was in a formal review of her new off-Broadway play and apparently the reviewer felt that condoning her preference for a feminine pronoun was not consistent with his dignity as a serious critic. Furthermore, he found fault with the "transvestite fantasies" of Jackie and "his" friends, as if these fantasies had less place on stage than the ones normally mounted. The reference to Candy, on the other hand, was in a gossipy, who's-who column. In this frivolous context, straight-and-narrow intellectualism broke down and the writer tolerated the feminine pronoun.

Nevertheless, even Vincent Canby succumbed and let Candy become "she." More than anyone else, Candy Darling has been accepted for what she chooses to be. She plays the role both on and off the screen, of emotion-hungry passivity, hiding her competitiveness, desiring only to please men worthy of being pleased by a woman like her. Jackie, however, writes her own material, directs her own shows, competes as an equal with other show-business personalities, and in general does not satisfy the man-worshipping stereotype. Candy, apparently, has earned her right to be "she" by being what every girl ought to be, while Jackie, who refuses to renounce male privilege—the right to build a career through one's own aggression and talent instead of the favors of others—remains "he."

One can't blame the *Voice* for the disparity; one can't blame the *Voice* for anything, except its choice of writers and, because that would border on advocacy of censorship, one can blame the *Voice* for nothing. New journalism has done away with stylebooks; writers are trusted to determine for themselves how to write. But the pronouns were on opposite pages; it's fascinating how the freedom of new journalism exposes biases as well as the truth.

A gay activist recently told me he didn't think of me as a she because he'd never seen me in a dress. 99% of the women I know also never wear dresses; does that qualify them to be called "he"? At meetings homosexuals frequently annoy me by asking why I'm not "in drag." The irony is that all my clothes, including my trousers and tops, were purchased in women's boutiques and tried on by me in the women's dressing room with other women. I never wear drag; I wear the clothes I like, obtained when and where I wanted them.

Only a few readers of GAY have known until now that

Vicki Richman, the newspaper's thoughtful columnist-reporter, is, in fact, a transvestite.

Photos by Eric Stephen Jacobs

My straight friends, who have become used to the advances of women, see nothing unfeminine in the way I dress, but gays, who have been weaned on the drag image of femininity—whether for queens or for real women like Judy Garland—just don't understand that I can take myself seriously and still be a woman. (Straights, also, will assume without question that I use the ladies' room, but my gay friends will get visibly nervous and ask if I'm ever "bothered," as if they wish that I would be, and God forbid that I should meet a lesbian I know coming out of the crapper!) Women have overcome preconceived notions of the way they're supposed to dress, but drag prevails for the rest of us. Is it any wonder that Candy is she and that Jackie, who is even flatter-chested and more businesslike than I, is he?

I suppose I get off on fetishistic flamboyance as much as anyone, but I discovered gradually that as a writer I could adjust to society more easily as a modern liberated woman and so my normal attire has become blue jeans and blazers and a flat chest and I save the drag for where it's appreciated, like the Metropolitan Opera, where I can spend an hour in the powder room putting on my face and still not be as vulgar as the Scarsdale society lady next to me.

One of the few times I wore a dress I was introduced as a transvestite to a homosexual in a singles bar who promptly asked whether I dressed that way all the time or "dressed straight" for work. "Don't you think my clothes are straight now?" I shrieked as I came down from the ceiling, scratching my bruised head. "No," he answered incredulously, with a simple-mindedness that drove me even wilder. I had purchased that dress for the pedestrian price of twenty dollars in the junior department of Macy's, where the least ostentatious daughters of suburban matrons come to be proper and unnoticed, but he decided it couldn't be straight, apparently only because it was on my back. If I had worn anything more straight, I would have been banished forever by the freaky pill-poppers I have a drag queen's misfortune to hang out with.

Homosexuals frequently refer to each other as "she" in the type of suppressed irony that suggests intimacy and affection. But the usage is reserved only for close friends at the baths or private parties and it would be an unspeakable insult for a stranger to say it or for the pronoun to be used in the wrong place. Some gay writers, therefore, hesitate to call transvestites "she," mistaking them for gay men. Transvestites can sleep with men or women or be celibate; what they have in common is that they get social, professional or erotic satisfaction from assuming a female identity. It amounts to a necessary courtesy to refer to them as "she."

But is a person actually a transvestite living as a woman or a gay man who enjoys dressing up. It's a difficult choice to make. I find myself referring to the La Fleur Sisters and to Lynne Carter as "he" and to Holly Woodlawn as "she." In other words, a female impersonator is a man; otherwise where's the impersonation?

It seems that private guilt often affects one's choice of a pronoun. In a recent issue of *The Advocate*, Randy Wicker made me a he, using my last name unprefixed, while favoring women with Ms. As reporters, we both had been covering the same trial at the Criminal Court. He rhapsodized about my jewelry and makeup, although I wasn't wearing nearly as much as the sexy girl who was working as the court stenographer. He also wrote that a policewoman had "identified" me as a he to the court. Since no one, including Mr. Wicker, had examined my birth certificate, driver's license or crotch, no one other than me was qualified to identify me as anything, which everyone from the judge on down, except Mr. Wicker, recognized. To my ears I was she and treated with deference. Nevertheless, Mr. Wicker privately insisted that an officer was staring at me with violent hostility throughout the trial.

Apparently Mr. Wicker cannot overcome his own insecurity about transvestitism and reads it into others. Several years ago, reporting on a gay street demonstration, he devoted much of his space to angry police reactions toward Sylvia Rivera, another transvestite, implying that her presence endangered the cause. Predictably, her biography is not included in the book Mr. Wicker co-authored, *The Gay Crusaders*, although she is known as a founder of gay militancy in New York. Kay Tobin, the other co-author, told me, however, that the omission of Sylvia Rivera was due to her alleged refusal to be interviewed.

Mr. Wicker can argue that his objectivity as a reporter dictated his choice of pronoun in my case. However, it apparently did not dictate that he report to his

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Encounter

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answers that they can hear, because each of the complaints comes out of years of experience that only *new experience* can contradict effectively. That's why good encounter groups are such powerful provocateurs of growth for individuals who have stood still for years and even decades in their efforts to relate to others.

But good encounter experiences for gay people have been rare. The reasons for this lie in the late appearance of exclusively gay groups. Because of the gross misapprehensions of most straight people about gay life, encounter groups of gay and straight people must either skirt all matters pertaining to gay life or devote a large amount of time to educating the straight members about gay life styles—a service the gay members are not getting paid for and which they should not be obliged to perform in order to talk openly about their experience. The same would be true to some degree for a member of any minority group.

If you argue that you have never found it difficult to discuss your gay experiences with straight friends, let me hasten to point out that the effectiveness of encounter comes directly from the fact that it is *not concerned with discussion*, with verbal talk *about* experiences, but rather with experience itself—with what is going on in the room right at the very moment two or more people are inter-acting. Try being completely open with straight friends about everything you feel when you are with them. I've found precious few who can handle or reciprocate the effort.

So, the point of exclusively gay encounter groups is not to discuss gay matters (whatever they are) but to facilitate maximum openness between the members of the group in their relating to each other. The result of this openness may indeed amount to some very effective gay consciousness-raising, but it comes here not from intellectual discussion so much as from direct, first-hand experiences.

And the point of this maximum openness between the members about how they are experiencing each other (and experiencing themselves) is *growth*—in each person's ability to relate fully to others and in his ability to be fully aware of what he is in fact feeling (not thinking) at the moment.

Each of the complaints at the head of this article is the result of some degree of disconnection between the person and the feelings that go together to make up his experience. Good encountering is the most effective tool I have experienced for re-connecting the self with feelings previously suppressed or ignored.

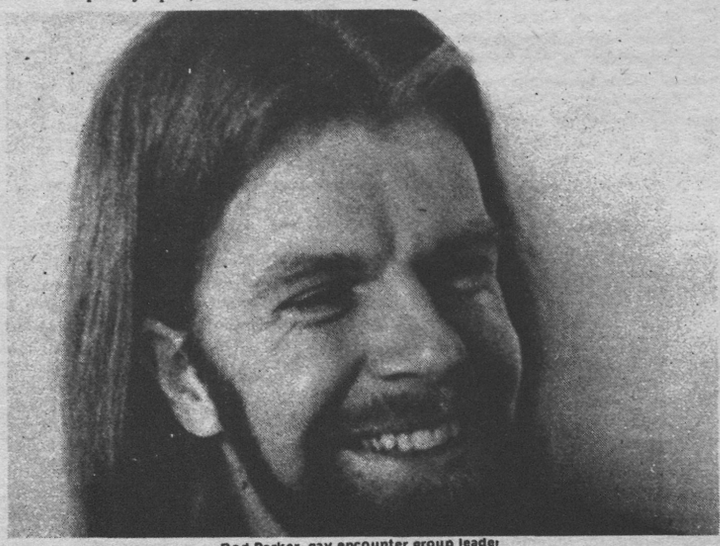
What is good encountering? It focuses on a completely open, honest and uncensored revealing of feelings aroused in each of the members of the group by what goes on in the room. Obviously, this could mean chaos, with hurtful trips being done on less aggressive members, if a facilitator (or the group's own good will) did not encourage some sort of order in which things were following through and resolved. It's one of the near-miracles of encounter that even the most hostile feelings, when fully expressed and responded to, can so often lead to feelings of warmth and trust between the persons involved.

A good encounter group usually requires the absence of certain kinds of people, and careful screening of prospective members has proven very helpful. Spectators, for instance, are not allowed; they are certain to be resented. People coming to the group "on a lark" or because it is "the thing to do" also detract and inhibit. Obviously, persons joining encounter with expectations of getting their sexual thrills from the occasional non-verbal exercises that may be used are destined to frustration as misfits. Also to be avoided is the person who needs intensive therapy so acutely that his needs cannot possibly be understood, let alone met, by the group members.

An astonishing degree of warmth and caring soon characterizes a well-functioning group. Sometimes these feelings are so prized by the members of the group that their efforts to maintain the "good vibes" gets momentarily in the way of open encounter. Open expression of warm feelings is often as difficult or more difficult for some members as expressing anger or hostility. Unlike hostile feelings, positive feelings do not usually go away after being expressed. This sometimes leaves a member with a new problem of "What comes next?"—an important kind of encounter indeed. What happens if those unaccustomed good feelings get reinforced and intensify?

The experience of freedom in an encounter group frightens most members in the beginning. Some never allow themselves to feel it and act upon it. They usually leave after a month or so, dragging their locks and cages behind them. With another jailer gone, the group relaxes into yet a new level of freedom. Some groups meet for a couple of months before real trust develops—the trust that enables the real excitement of encounter to take place.

Why gay encounter? Because it feels good while it's happening and because it helps facilitate growth in one's ability to enjoy and find lasting satisfaction in being with people. For some of us, encounter opened the doors that enabled people to come near us for the first time, and visa versa. For me, after nine years of cerebral psychoanalysis and "group therapy" (in which we discussed and discussed and discussed), encounter meant the beginning of me as a loving person.



Rod Parker, gay encounter group leader

To He

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readers that it was I who had secured his rights to take notes and to be acknowledged as a member of the press. When a court officer forbade us from writing and when only credentials of the establishment press were recognized, Mr. Wicker quietly complied until I protested and secured the respective privileges. But to him, my makeup, jewelry and spurious identification as a he were more newsworthy items.

In his many years of working for gay liberation, Mr. Wicker has doubtlessly come across countless activists who have concealed their names. Although, to his credit, he has (after legally changing his name) never shirked from using his new name in gay liberation work, he has never been tempted to blow a gay brother's cover and, in the name of objective reporting, to reveal another's real name. Yet he was willing to jeopardize my effectiveness as a journalist by referring to me as a man. Had the court officers read his story, they could have made it very difficult for me to continue reporting and certainly I would have been unable to secure the press privileges that he came to enjoy as well as I. Of course, I myself have never denied what I am in print, although I have not advertised it either if it was not necessary in the context. It simply is my choice to make. Mr. Wicker was presuming to make the choice for me.

Asking what pronoun is preferred is the simplest and most honest way. I used to answer, "Whatever comes most naturally." Unfortunately, when a friend found it natural to make me a "he," and a mutual transvestite friend a "she," I was forced to abandon the friend and the answer.

I'm most tolerant with friends who knew me before and who plead that they can't get used to the change. But there are limits to my patience. A girl friend, whom I've known since childhood, instructed the saleswoman as we left the fitting room together, ". . . and that dress is for him." The nonplussed clerk looked at me, at the door to the women-only room, and back at me again, as my friend helpfully corrected, "Oh, I mean *her*," in case the clerk were a little slow and still didn't understand. I resolved, as I favored limitless space with the virtuosity of my Jack Benny stare, that I would not be too much of a spoilsport if I requested that she try a little harder in the future.

John Francis Hunter's solution is to invent a new pronoun for transvestites. Activists like Sylvia Rivera and Bebe Scarpi would probably appreciate it, because their transvestitism is a distinct form of gayness that needs its own identity. However, most transvestites I know don't like to be distinguished from women and a different pronoun would irritate them. That's why, by the way, there are few transvestites in gay liberation; they dislike being treated like gay men. If referring to them as "she" seems like a lie, all I can ask is: What harm does it do? Is it any more immoral than any other personal sexual preference?

Vicki Richman: GAY columnist and a first-rate reporter on Manhattan's hip scene.

Since I don't get off on being a girl to the point of orgasm, I might answer that the harm lies in entering a bed relationship under false pretences. But many transvestites do get sexually excited at the prospect (they can't understand my flat chest and untucked cock), and for their sakes I'm willing to liberate myself and say that's great, honey, if you dig it.

Only remember it's a fast way to a free sex-change operation. I'd rather have mine in a hospital than in an alley.

I think Jackie Curtis has hit upon the ideal solution. When Jackie's in a good mood, everyone, except Richard Nixon and John Wayne, becomes a she.

Richman, Vicki. "To He or Not to He." Gay NYC, vol. 3, no. 83, 21 Aug. 1972, pp. 13+. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, link.gale.com/apps/doc/TDLUTT475955815/AHSI?u=nypl&sid=bookmark-AHSI. Accessed 12 Nov. 2024.